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The Relationship between Family Functions and Juvenile Delinquency: A Case of Nakuru Municipality, Kenya

Muola, James M. - Egerton University, Laikipia Campus College,
P.O. BOX 13855, Nakuru, Kenya
Tel. +254 721 228 621
Email - mateemuola2000@yahoo.com

Ndung'u, Mary N. - Egerton University, Laikipia Campus College,
P.O. BOX 13855, Nakuru, Kenya

Ngesa, Fredrick - Egerton University, Laikipia Campus College,
P.O. BOX 13855, Nakuru, Kenya

Abstract

The incidences of juvenile delinquency have increased in recent years in Kenya. Most of the studies done on Juvenile delinquency have paid little or no attention to family functions as one of the possible causes. This study was carried out in Nakuru town Municipality on former street children on rehabilitation in three homes. The sample was 148 and included all the 30 girls in the three homes and 118 boys selected using the stratified random sampling technique from a population of 241. Three managers of the three homes and six purposively selected parents were included. Two interview schedules and a questionnaire were used to collect data from the respondents. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson's moment correlation and t-test. Juvenile delinquency was found to be significantly related to marital stability, family size, marital adjustment and

mode of discipline. A weak relationship between juvenile delinquency and socio-economic status was observed. The delinquency level of boys was significantly higher than that of girls. It was concluded that there is a relationship between family functions and juvenile delinquency. The study recommended strengthened of counselling on parenting and involvement of families and non-governmental organizations in the rehabilitation efforts.

Key words: family, functions, juvenile, and delinquency.

Introduction

Juvenile delinquency has greatly increased in the Kenyan society in recent years. In many homes and schools, parents and teachers have to deal with undisciplined children. The situation is not any better in the streets of our major towns. The juvenile activities include violence, theft, involvement in illegal gangs such as Mugiki (Standard Team, May 19, 2009, pp. 19-20), drug-related offences, vandalism and vagrancy. Many of these activities are not reported, thus it is impossible to arrive at an accurate assessment of the number of children who engage in delinquency. In the 1960s in the United States of America, Gottlieb and Ramsey (1964) observed that only about one third of adolescents apprehended by police for offences considered delinquent were ever taken to the police station or the juvenile court. Usually, published figures greatly underestimate the real incidences (Snooks, 1980).

In Kenya, the number of children in difficult circumstances, who include juvenile delinquents, has not been established (Family Support Institute, 1989). The family is the main focus on juvenile delinquency in America and other countries as one of the causes of the problem. Findings show the factors that foster delinquency include marital relations, communication, gender, family disruptions, parental absence, lack of support and cohesiveness in families (McCord, Widom, & Crowell, 2001; Hammen, 1996; Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986).

The traditional African communities had an organized extended family system of bringing up children in which the child's survival, protection and development rights were taken care of (Mbiti, 1969). The introduction of Western culture, education, urbanization and new technology replaced the extended family system with the nuclear family system (Levi, 2002). These changes contributed to the existence of street children, who have to take care of themselves, hence, juvenile delinquency.

More recently, other global forces such as, economic recession, urbanization, external debts, HIV/AIDs pandemic, population pressure and poverty have threatened the welfare of most families and children. As a result of these challenges, more Kenyan families are poor, unable to afford basic commodities, including food. Children from such families have ended up in the streets, thus the problem of juvenile delinquency (Family Support Institute, 1989).

Many schools and colleges in Kenya have experienced acts of juvenile delinquency in recent years (Republic of Kenya, 2001). In its efforts to rehabilitate juvenile delinquents, the Kenya Government has set up Children's Remand Homes and Approved Schools. A number of non-governmental organizations have also come up with rehabilitation centres. There are 34 such centres in Kenya that are rehabilitating former street children distributed in seven provinces as follows: Nairobi, 19; Rift Valley, 6; Nyanza, 3; Central, 2; Eastern, 2; Western, 1; and Coast, 1 (African Network for Prevention and Protection Against Child Abuse and Neglect, 2002).

One of the major best predictors of adolescent delinquency is relationship with the parents (Meyer & Dussek, 1979). Children who are rejected by parents, who grow up in families where there is conflict or who are inadequately supervised are at a greater risk of becoming delinquent. Understanding how the family influences juvenile behaviour brings us closer to the core of the problem (Doggett, 2004).

The family is one of the strongest socializing agents, it can teach children to control unacceptable behaviour, to delay gratification, and to respect the rights of others. The family can also teach children aggressive, violent, and anti-social behaviour. Thus good parenting can possibly prevent delinquent behaviour (Doggett, 2004).

Juvenile anti-social behaviour can lead to insecurity now and in the future. The problem of insecurity is currently being experienced in Kenya through the proscribed youthful Mugiki terror gang which recently massacred 28 people and keeps on terrorizing business people and the public in many towns (Nzioka & Njagi, 2009, April 22, pp.1-6). Poor family functions are some of the major factors related to juvenile delinquency that have been identified in the Western World (Regoli & Hewitt, 1994), but little, if any literature on the same exists in Kenya. Hence, the need for this study.

Hypotheses

It was hypothesized that there is no statistically significant:

- i. Relationship between marital stability and juvenile delinquency.
- ii. Relationship between family socio-economic status and juvenile delinquency.
- iii. Relationship between family size and juvenile delinquency.
- iv. Relationship between marital adjustment and juvenile delinquency.
- v. Relationship between parental mode of discipline and juvenile delinquency.
- vi. Difference in delinquency levels between boys and girls.

Literature Review

Juvenile delinquency is defined; a) legally as behaviour of a child between seven and seventeen years, which violates existing laws and b) socially as aggressive behaviour unapproved of by the community (Thornton & Voigt, 1992). There are two types of delinquent acts, status offences and criminal acts (Lundman, 1993). Status offences are offences that apply only to juveniles and are not considered criminal if committed by adults. Young people below the age of 17 are subjected to legal interventions for acts that would be criminal if committed by adults. The juveniles risk arrest and detention in a facility exclusively reserved for youthful offenders, adjudication as a delinquent by a juvenile court or commitment to a juvenile facility accepting only adolescent offenders.

The sociological theories of delinquency suggest that crime, like other social behaviour, is a social product which is precipitated by sociological factors such as rapid social change, urbanization, disrupted family lives, child rearing practices, unemployment, peer pressure and poverty (Regoli & Hewitt, 1994).

The positivist theories of delinquency emphasize on biological traits and physiological factors such as hormonal imbalance, chemical deficiency and brain damage as the causes of criminal behavior (Feldman, 1996). Psychological theories assume that anti-social behaviour is as a result of modeling, learning from the environment, childhood conflicts and cognitive factors.

A number of factors have been demonstrated to influence the involvement of juveniles in crime. Study findings and literature reviewed by Besemer (2007) show that drug use; schooling and academic performance; family factors, especially factors associated with parenting behaviour and styles are related to delinquency. Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber (1986) conducted a meta-analysis of concurrent and longitudinal studies on the relation of family factors (including parental involvement with children, parental supervision, parental discipline, parental rejection of their children, child's rejection of the parent, parental criminality and aggression, marital relations, and parental absence) to juvenile delinquency and conduct problems and concluded that some factors were more powerful predictors of juvenile conduct problems and delinquency than others.

Several juvenile justice researchers have linked risk factors to delinquency (Hawkins, Herrenkohl, Farrington, Brewer, Catalano, & Harachi, 1998; Lipsey & Derzon, 1998), and many have also noted multiplicative effects if several risk factors are present. Herrenkohl, Hawkins, Chung, Hill, and Battin-Pearson, (2000) report that a 10-year-old exposed to six or more risk factors (such as being male, low socio-economic status, separation from parents, family conflict, broken homes and harsh discipline) is 10 times as likely to commit a violent act by age 18 as a 10-year-old exposed to only one risk factor.

Family characteristics such as poor parenting skills, family size, home discord, child maltreatment, and antisocial parents are risk factors linked to juvenile delinquency (Derzon & Lipsey, 2000; Wasserman & Seracini, 2001). In a study that included a total of 106 convicted adolescents from Eastern Turkey in a reformatory and 126 unconvicted adolescents; Isir, Tokdemir, Küçüker, and Dulger, (2009) found family disruption, education levels of parents, the rate of imprisonment among first-and second-degree relatives and migration as a family from their place of birth to play an important role in the development of adolescent delinquency.

Marital instability may take the form of divorce, separation, death of one spouse, absence of normal child-parent relationship or birth of children outside wedlock. Juvenile delinquency and indiscipline have been associated with the absence of one parent in the home, absentee parents, divorce or separation (Doggett, 2004; Snooks, 1980; Ministry of Education Science and Technology, 2001)

In a study of 793 Canberra (Australia) high school students, Mak (1994) found both maternal and paternal neglect and rejection to be significantly associated with delinquency. Some research has linked being raised in a single-parent family with increased delinquency (McCord, Widom & Crowell, 2001).

In a study of 26 (15 males and 11 females) American children, Doggett (2009) came up with findings that suggest that family structure play both negative and positive role in the production of juvenile delinquency. Children who live in homes with only one parent or in which marital relationships have been disrupted by divorce or separation are more likely to display a range of behavioral problems including delinquency, than children who are from two parent families (Thornberry, Smith, Rivera, Huizinga, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1999).

According to Klein and Forehand (1997) a major factor within juvenile delinquency and families is single parent households versus two parent households. Studies have shown a connection between delinquent and/or criminal behavior and single parent families ((Muehlenberg, 2002; Popenoe, 1997; Wright & Wright, 1994). Two parent households provide increased supervision and surveillance while single parenthood increases the likelihood of delinquency simply by the fact that there is one less person to supervise adolescent behavior (Wright & Wright, 1994).

Family socio-economic status refers to a family's relative position in a community as defined by income, occupation, level of education, number of siblings per family and material possessions at home (Githua, 2002). Delinquency and crime has been associated with lower socio-economic class (Lotz, Poole & Regoli, 1985; Helms and Turner, 1981). Over 60% of the Kenyan population lives below poverty level, surviving on less than one dollar per day (the Kenya Children's Parliament, 2004). This kind of poverty means that children in such families live in conditions that may give impetus to juvenile behaviour.

In a study of a sample comprising 500 school boys and 500 institutionalised delinquent boys aged 10 to 17 years in Boston, Sampson and Laub (1994) found that informal social control by parents and family poverty were related to delinquency. In another similar study of 206 boys from Oregon elementary schools located in high crime rate areas conducted by Larzelere and Patterson (1990) suggested that parents with lower socio-economic status may experience greater stress levels and fewer resources, which may

hinder the adequacy of their parenting skills resulting to delinquency in their children.

Smaller families can more effectively control and fulfill most of the needs of their children. Delinquency is likely to be found in larger families because larger families are more often found in the lower social economic strata (Thornton & Voigt, 1992). Research findings indicate that children from large families are more likely to commit delinquent acts than children from small families (Wasserman & Seracini, 2001; West & Farrington, 1973).

The term marital adjustment was used to refer to how well parents get along, such as the absence of tension, domestic violence and other forms of quarrelling in the home. According to Thornton and Voigt (1992), evidence from studies suggests that psychologically broken homes (that is, homes where there is a great deal of conflict and tension) are likely to produce delinquents. Children from violent homes display behavioural and emotional disorders (Turshen & Holcomb, 1993). As parents display aggressive behaviour, children learn to imitate it as acceptable means of achieving goals (Dogett, 2004).

Gorman-Smith and Tolan (1998) found that parental conflict, harsh parental discipline, lack of maternal affection and parental aggressiveness predicted violent behavior and crime. Gorman-Smith, Deborah, Sheidow and David (2001) found that children are more likely to resort to violence if there is violence within relationships that they may share with their family. Children who witness marital discord are at greater risk of becoming delinquents. A research by Amato & Sobolewski (2001) demonstrated associations between exposure to parental divorce and marital discord while growing up and children's psychological distress in adulthood. Social learning theory argues that aggressive behavior is learned; as parents display aggressive behavior, children learn to imitate it as an acceptable means of achieving goals (Wright & Wright, 1994).

The mode of discipline can be a likely cause of problematic behaviour. Poor monitoring and supervision, inconsistent discipline and physical punishment are related to delinquent and violent outcomes later in life (Farrington, 2002). In contrast, involvement and positive parenting can prevent such behaviour. Besemer (2007) found a positive relationship between negative parenting (as indicated by amount of time spent with the child and role modeling) and children's aggressive behaviour

McCord's (1979) study of 250 boys found that among boys at age 10, the strongest predictors of later convictions for violent offenses (up to age 45) were poor parental supervision, parental conflict, and parental aggression, including harsh, punitive discipline. In a sample of 240, Saddiqui (2003) found significant differences on the variable of communication, value and norms, affective expression and control among the family members of delinquents (N = 120) and non-delinquents (N = 120) in Pakistan. In another research, Kim, Jungmeen, Mavis and David (1999) found that coercive parenting and lack of parental monitoring contributes to boys' antisocial behaviors.

Boys have been known to demonstrate more aggression than girls. Boys tend to be more physically aggressive, while girls show more relational aggression (Tremblay, 2000). Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber (1986) found direct control to be significantly related to the prevalence and incidence of general delinquency and the incidence of drug use among boys. In the case of girls, direct control was only related to the prevalence of drug use.

Methodology

The study employed a descriptive survey, which adopted an *ex-post facto* research design. The *ex-post facto* design attempts to discover causes after changes have taken place without controlling or manipulating variables that caused them.

The study sample comprised of 148 (118 boys and 30 girls) selected from a population of 241 children from three rehabilitation homes. The stratified random sampling method and the simple random method were used to select the boys while all the available girls were included in the study. All the managers of the three rehabilitation homes and six purposively selected parents were included in the study.

An interview schedule for juveniles, a self-administered questionnaire for managers and an interview schedule for parents were used to collect data. Interview schedules were preferred for children and parents because most of them were of low level of education. The three instruments were mainly used to gather information about the children's family background, size, economic status, parents' marital status; marital stability; causes of juvenile delinquency; information about the children and mode of discipline used by parents. The main instrument, that is, the children's interview schedule had a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 0.74.

The researchers visited the three children's homes and administered the interview schedules to the children and the parents. The items were read to the respondents and their responses recorded. The school managers were given the questionnaires to respond to the items on their own, after which the instruments were collected. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient and t-test.

Results and discussion

The first five hypotheses stated that there is no statistically significant relationship between:

- i. Marital stability and juvenile delinquency.
- ii. Socio-economic status and juvenile delinquency.
- iii. Family size and juvenile delinquency.
- iv. Marital adjustment and juvenile delinquency.
- v. Parental mode of discipline and juvenile delinquency.

To test these hypotheses, a Pearson's product moment correlation was run. The results are presented in table 1.

In the first hypothesis, the observed relationship between marital stability and juvenile delinquency was found to be statistically significant ($r = -.16$, $P < 0.05$). This finding implies that juvenile delinquency increases as marital stability decreases. Thus, there was more delinquency among children from unstable families than among those from stable families. The information gathered showed that 68.2% of the children came from single or no parent families. Only 31.8% came from two-parent families.

Sixty six percent of the managers noted that the children in the homes came from broken families. These findings are in agreement with previous studies which show that family instability gives rise to children with anti-social behaviour (Doggett, 2009; McCord *et al.*, 2001; Popenoe, 1997; Lotz, Poole & Regoli, 1985; Mak, 1984).

In the second hypothesis, the findings in Table 1 showed that there is no statistically significant ($r = - 0.04$, $P > 0.05$) relationship between socio-economic status and juvenile delinquency. The weak negative relationship implies that as family socio-economic status decreases, juvenile delinquency increases. This finding could be attributed to the fact that a big percentage of the children came from poor families. From the parents who were

interviewed, 83.4% had a monthly income of less than 5,000 Kenyan shillings as compared to 16.7% who had a monthly income of more than 5,000 Kenyan shillings. Only, about five percent of the parents had formal employment while the rest were casual employees, self-employed or had no employment at all. With this kind of discrepancy, the findings may not be conclusive. This could also imply that parents with relatively good income can provide for the needs of their children and therefore hardly engage in juvenile activities. Previous studies have shown that low socio-economic status is related to juvenile delinquency (Sampson & Laub, 1994; Larzelere & Patterson, 1990).

In the third hypothesis, the results showed that there is a statistically significant ($r = -0.22$, $P < 0.01$) relationship between family size and juvenile delinquency (see table 1). The inverse relationship implies that the larger the family the less the likelihood of children becoming juvenile delinquents. According to Thornton and Voigt (1992), the child from a large poor family may be delinquent because children from poor families are more often adjudicated delinquents. Thus, it is not the family size per se that leads to juvenile delinquency, but factors within the family, such as provision of effective control and fulfillment of emotional needs of children. Previous research has shown that children from families with four or more children have an increased chance of offending (Wasserman & Seracini, 2001; West & Farrington, 1973). However, it is important to note that almost all the children interviewed came from fairly large families (table 4).

In the fourth hypothesis, the results reported in Table 1 show that there is a statistically significant ($r = 0.23$, $P < 0.01$) relationship between marital adjustment (as measured by experience of domestic violence among family members) and juvenile delinquency.

These results confirm that presence of domestic violence leads to juvenile delinquency. This finding corroborates what has been found by others (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Gorman-Smith *et al.*, 2001; Gorman-Smith & Tolan 1998; Turshen & Holcomb, 1993; Thornton & Voigt, 1992;). Fifty percent of the parents and 66.6% of the managers of the children's homes studied felt that the children become juvenile delinquents due to domestic violence.

The observed results after testing the fifth hypothesis showed that there is a statistically significant ($r = 0.38$, $P < 0.01$) relationship between parental mode of discipline and juvenile delinquency. The results imply that the use of

physical punishment as a mode of discipline encourages violence, and thus, delinquency among children. This is as opposed to parents who explain to their children why they should not engage in undesirable behaviour. Eighty percent of the children reported that their parents or guardians mostly used physical punishment to correct them whenever they went wrong as opposed to 20% whose parents explained to them why they should not engage in undesirable behaviour (table 6).

According to Meyer and Dussek (1979), juvenile delinquents often come from homes with a high degree of parental rejection characterized by the use of physical punishment. These children not only model aggression, but they also run away from hostile homes. This finding is supported by previous studies (Dogget, 2009; Besemer, 2002; Farrington, 2002; Kim *et al.*, 1999; McCord, 1997).

The sixth hypothesis stated that there is no statistically significant difference in delinquency levels between boys and girls. The results of t-test analysis showed that there is a statistically significant ($t = 5.27$, $P < 0.01$) difference in levels of delinquency between boys and girls.

These findings mean that boys are more prone to juvenile delinquency than girls. According to Kenty (2004), delinquency behaviour is perceived to be related to the socialization of one's gender role. This also agrees with existing literature, that suggests that boys are more likely to show conduct problems (Hyatt, 2004; Tremblay, 2000; Mann & MacKenzie, 1996).

Conclusions

Based on the findings of this study, it was concluded that:

- i. Divorce, separation, death of one parent and birth out of wedlock are likely to lead children to delinquent behaviour.
- ii. Low socio-economic status leads children into anti-social behaviour due to lack of basic necessities.
- iii. Large families contribute to juvenile delinquency.
- iv. Domestic violence encourages aggressive behaviour among children
- v. Use of physical punishment as a mode of discipline encourages delinquent behaviour in children.
- vi. Boys engage in more delinquent acts than girls.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made:

- i. The Government of Kenya should enforce the provisions of the Children's Act, Cap 586, part 3, section 23 subsection 2 (a) which gives parents the duty to provide their children with adequate diet, clothing, medical care, education and guidance. If this is done, delinquent activities will reduce and children will not run away to the streets.
- ii. The Government, churches and non-governmental organizations should pull resources together in an attempt to rehabilitate juvenile delinquents in their homes in addition to rehabilitating them in centers from where they are likely to return to the streets.
- iii. The Government, churches and non-governmental organizations should strengthen family counselling services to minimize family problems such as divorce, domestic violence, conflict and violence that affect children.
- iv. The Government should strengthen its efforts to reduce poverty levels through economic interventions among the poor, especially for families with several dependent children.
- v. The Ministry of Health and private family health service providers should offer affordable services to ensure that parents get the number of children they can effectively take care of.
- vi. The Government needs to come up with ways of creating more jobs to absorb rehabilitated youth.
- vii. The mode of discipline on children by parents or guardians should focus on other methods other than the use of physical punishment.
- viii. Parents and the whole society should learn to treat and socialize both boys and girls in the same manner to minimize gender differences in anti-social behaviour.

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Table 1: Pearson's product-moment coefficient of correlation between juvenile delinquency and marital status, socio-economic status, family size, marital adjustment and mode of discipline (N = 148).

| Variable | Juvenile delinquency | Significance |
|-----------------------|----------------------|--------------|
| Marital stability | -0.16* | 0.050 |
| Socio-economic status | -0.04 | 0.600 |
| Family size | -0.22** | 0.010 |
| Marital adjustment | 0.23** | 0.010 |
| Mode of discipline | 0.38** | 0.001 |

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

Table 2: Delinquent children's marital status

| Marital status | Frequency | Percent |
|----------------|-----------|---------|
| Orphan | 28 | 18.9 |
| Single | 73 | 49.3 |
| Married | 47 | 31.8 |
| Total | 148 | 100 |

Table 3: Number of family members staying in the delinquent children's homes

| Number of people | Frequency | Percentage |
|------------------|------------|--------------|
| 1-3 | 3 | 2.0 |
| 4-7 | 35 | 23.6 |
| 8-11 | 80 | 54.1 |
| 12 plus | 30 | 20.3 |
| Total | 148 | 100.0 |

Table 4: Mode of discipline commonly used by parents or guardians of the delinquent children

| Mode of discipline | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------------|------------|------------|
| Physical | 119 | 80.4 |
| Induction | 29 | 19.6 |
| Total | 148 | 100 |

Table 5: Independent samples t-test on levels of delinquency between boys and girls

| Gender | N | Mean | SD | Mean Difference | t-value | Sig.(2 tailed) |
|--------|-----|-------|----|-----------------|---------|-----------------|
| Male | 118 | 26.83 | | 7.40 | 7.26 | 5.25** |
| Female | 30 | 19.57 | | 6.60 | | 0.00 |

** P < 0.01